

Mapping Academic Values in the Disciplines: A Corpus-based Approach

Davide Simone Giannoni.

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The study of academic discourse has a long-standing tradition in applied linguistics and LSP research. As pointed out by scholars such as Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Hyland, among others, academic discourse has both a cognitive and a social dimension: it is the vehicle through which knowledge is disseminated and constructed, but it is also the site of negotiation and construction of epistemological and ontological beliefs by a community of experts.

Giannoni takes this research focus almost to a philosophical level, by focusing on the concept of “value” in academic discourse. His volume aims to provide a description of how academic values are conveyed by lexical elements of published research articles belonging to different disciplinary communities: “the focus of this study is on the value system encoded in academic discourse, that is in the language used by researchers to disseminate their findings and engage in scholarly debate” (page 42). Through an inductive analysis of a corpus of a hundred research articles from ten selected academic disciplines, Giannoni aims to provide an understanding of how values are distributed across academic domains (in terms of lexis), and what entities seem to be the object of these evaluative lexical items.

After a brief introduction outlining the purpose and content of the book, Chapter 2 provides a very comprehensive review of the literature. From a very broad overview of the history of academia and the establishment of academic disciplines, the focus is gradually narrowed through the discussion of discourse communities and disciplinary communities, academic English and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), research genres, the research article, values in academia, theories of evaluation and stance, and the use of corpora in applied linguistics research.

Chapter 3 overviews materials and data, including ten research articles taken from established publications in ten disciplinary domains: biology, physics, medicine, engineering, anthropology, history, economics, sociology, mathematics and computer science.

The following chapter, methodology, explains in detail how the corpus was set up and the selection of candidate items, which was based both on frequency and manual inspection. Only items with more than 100 occurrences in the corpus were selected (that is, at least one word per text), and the resulting list of 1,174 types was further reduced to 83 based on the semantic fields observed in the piloting phase and the parameters of evaluative lexis outlined in Chapter 2. These items, mostly adjectives but also other parts of speech, were then grouped into categories, including lexical sets, synonyms and antonyms. The four main categories identified, in order of size, were “goodness”, “size”, “novelty” and “relevance”. Additional items, exclusions, and concordances were then inspected manually, to complete the profile of each category. The assumption is that each one of these categories signals an axiological variable, or value, “relevant to the disciplinary communities that employ it in the RA genre” (page 77).

The following four chapters overview each category in detail, presenting overall results, distribution across disciplines, and a short discussion about the saliency of the category and the type of markers that seem to realize it. An overall picture is gained in Chapter 9, where Giannoni, with the aid of several tables and graphs, discusses the results as a whole and in terms of interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary variation, proposing thus an axiological profile of the disciplines. Chapter 10 is devoted to theoretical insights, the role of academic values, methodological consideration, and directions for further research. He highlights how the values embodied in research writing, as described in his study, seem to span both a social dimension, specific to the scientific community, and a cultural dimension, given by the discipline itself, and suggests that the four variables described in his study “can be assigned to the “value set” of *desirability*, because they all qualify aspects that are desirable (or not) from a researcher’s point of view” (page 233).

My critique to Giannoni’s study is that, although it explicitly focuses on axiology, it often blurs the line and seems to highlight instead aspects that reflect epistemology, i.e. epistemic beliefs about how knowledge is acquired and what constitutes knowledge (in academia, in the specific disciplinary community), what a discipline studies and how it is studied. For instance, as he observes in discussing realizations of the goodness marker “problem/s” in Computer Science, “The nature of this discipline and of the specialism considered (human-computer interaction, centered

on technical trials and troubleshooting strategies) may help to explain its special position in the corpus” (page 102). In this case, it seems that the semantic realizations of “problem” reflect the nature of the object of study, rather than the axiological profile of the discipline. Granted, these are intertwined facets of the social and cultural reality of academic communities, but the overall impression is that rather than axiological profiles of the disciplines examined, epistemological profiles seem to emerge from the study.

“Academic values may be defined as variables pertaining especially to the social and cultural dimension of academia” (page 42). Indeed values, as considered in this sense, are embedded in the language used in academic genres, the research article among others, yet if we consider values as markers of cultural identity, not much of this identity, in terms of purposes, desirable disciplinary outcomes, and perceptions of quality is revealed by the study. Nothing, for instance, is mentioned further on about the three values described in page 49 – the belief in the underlying value of science, the belief in the authority of authoritative scholars as guiding lights in the advancement of knowledge, and the belief in the value of English as a medium for publication. True, the linguistic markers described in the study provide “authors and readers alike with a yardstick for interpreting prior/new knowledge claims” (page 233), but these seem to be more a reflection of disciplinary epistemology rather than facets of the system of values, beliefs, and ideologies that imbue social communication within academic disciplines.

In light of these considerations, Giannoni’s further research can pursue the question of how the experts themselves perceive values as embedded in academic communication, that is, the part of the study that was eliminated after the pilot. A few interviews and maybe expert commentaries on the same research articles would have provided a sense of the participants’ perspective, which I believe is key when the focus of the research is on culturally/socially shared beliefs, ideologies, and on what people think is important to them.

Giannoni’s study is competent, interesting, and takes an original angle to the analysis of academic discourse, but the text is still very much flavored with the typical redundancy one would expect in a dissertation work, and raises the question of whether it warranted publication in book format. Albeit valuable, in my opinion it would have been more effectively disseminated as

an article, especially since – as the author admits – his study “only touches the tip of the iceberg” (page 87).

This book might be interesting for an audience of linguists who are concerned with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and the epistemological and ontological facets of academic written discourse, particularly in professional research articles. It is recommended for those who are interested in corpus research and its application to the study of communicative practices in written communication.

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Reviewed by **Raffaella Negretti**

Stockholm University (Sweden)

raffaella.negretti@english.su.se

